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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain the relationship between publication and professionalism in the culture of the American research university. To act, order, and believe in relation to the dominant image in contemporary composition studies is to understand published, professional discourse as the sacred well of the culture. The published discourse of composition and the image of the publishing professional, its ideal of excellence, necessarily create hierarchies that enforce conformity to that ideal. The reorientation of some composition specialists from "hapless bottom feeders" to endowed chairs has come about through the acceptance of values, assumptions, and practices that have traditionally enforced the hierarchical oppositions sometimes deplored in rhetoric and composition. Through a process of professionalization the huge group of non-publishing composition teachers are now effectively marginalized or devalued even within the context of rhetoric and composition. No longer can the composition scholar look to the traditional literature/composition binary to explain the hierarchy of productivity in English departments. The ultimate tyranny of a culture's centralizing image is its ability to legislate conformity to it by making itself appear part of the natural order. The elevation of the publishing professional as the cultural ideal of those who teach writing is an "achieved" state of affairs, a construction, an argument. Contains 15 references. (TB)

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The Publishing Professional: Composition's "Tyrannizing Image"

In Visions of Order, his 1964 treatise on culture and discourse, University of Chicago rhetorician Richard Weaver introduced the concept of the "tyrannizing image." "[A]t the heart of every culture," Weaver maintained, there is a

> center of authority from which there proceed subtle and pervasive pressures upon us to conform and to repel the unlike as disruptive. . . . At this center there lies a 'tyrannizing image,' which draws everything toward itself. This image is the ideal of its excellence.

If you've not already guessed from my title, I want to use Weaver's phrase *tyrannizing image* to help explain the relationship between publication and professionalism in the culture of the American research university and the emergence of composition studies within that institutional arrangement. I want to argue that Weaver's model can help us identify and explore what I take to be composition studies' tyrannizing image, the publishing professional.

According to Weaver, the forms that the tyrannizing image

> can take and the particular manifestations that it can find are various. . . . But examine them as we will, we find this inward facing toward some high representation. This is the sacred well of the culture

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> from which inspiring waters like magnetic lines of force flow out and hold the various activities in a subservience of acknowledgement. Not to feel this magnetic pull toward identification and assimilation is to be outside the culture. (11-12)

The tyrannizing image of a culture is its authoritative center, the locus of "the ideal," a representation of excellence to which the culture both subscribes and strives, an embodiment of its most prominent beliefs and values. This image operates tyrannically because it functions *between* believers and experience, framing concerns and potentializing responses to them like a lens. Those who are tyrannized "by the cultural image view the world in a particular way; they act, order, and believe in relation to the image" (Cushman and Hauser 321).

To act, order, and believe in relation to the dominant image in contemporary composition studies is to understand the published, professional discourse as the sacred well of the culture. As Robert Connors wrote already ten years ago, "[o]ur discipline, composition studies, was formed by and largely exists through the professional journals" (348). This discourse constitutes the content of graduate seminars and lectures. It functions as a sorting device for graduate students. Their level of preparation is defined by their awareness of what we call "the disciplinary conversation." Their relationship to this conversation is judged by the standards of its production--the best students are those whom we declare capable of duplicating

the conventions of our "discourse community." And as composition graduate students invariably learn one way or another, not to feel what Weaver calls "this magnetic pull . . . is to be outside the culture." Most significant to my talk today, a demonstrable understanding of this published discourse, a kind of archival awareness of it, is seen as a necessary precondition for developing acceptable pedagogy. How, publishing professionals have asked with great frequency, could one presume to teach writing effectively without it?

The subtle and pervasive tyranny of a culture's ideal of excellence manifests itself, according to Weaver, in the production of hierarchy, status, and memory. The published discourse of composition and the image of the publishing professional, its ideal of excellence, necessarily create hierarchies that enforce conformity to that ideal. Those who consistently trade in the production and consumption of professional discourse acquire privilege, authority, and influence; those who don't, don't. Status need not be conceived cynically, however. Those Robin Varnum has called the first wave of composition scholars often characterized their aspirations on behalf of the emerging field. In any case, Weaver suggests, "people cannot identify or appreciate status unless they can carry with them a memory of [their culture's] hierarchic structure and of the image in response to which it has framed itself" (40). And the professional discourse of composition provides us with a memory of our research-impoverished, "current-

traditional" past: colorful descriptions of the arduous battle to squirm out of the clammy, oppressive grip of literary studies so that we might create an institutional space where composition studies could be constructed.

In a chapter of Bullock and Trimbur's The Politics of Writing Instruction, Charles Schuster offers what Weaver might call the present knowledge of our past. "[L]iterary faculty," according to Schuster's aggressively jocose construction of categories, "often look upon their compositional brothers and sisters as incompetent, idiosyncratic, confused, valueless, untenurable" (86). Schuster declares "composition specialists" to be like Boxer, the pathological workhorse of George Orwell's Animal Farm:

> they are committed to improving the condition of their farm and know that it is they--and no one else--who can accomplish this goal. They are quite often the responsibility bearers in an English department, the ones who care about undergraduate education, curricular reform, high school-college articulation. . . . Who else would choose to do all the work of teaching writing and administering freshman composition? (That is, after all, part of their "stupidity.") (87)

Although few accounts are as fantastical as this one, composition's disciplinary memory is heavily infused with the narrative of conflict. The fact that the most recent Four Cs included a packed-house session devoted to the reform of doctoral

programs in composition has not relieved us of the felt need to practice reciting the awful past. Lead articles in two of the last three issues of College Composition and Communication, have rehearsed the "ghettoization" (Min-Zahn Lu) and "marginalization" (R. Miller) of composition at the hands of literary critics. Like the distressed wife in Robert Frost's Home Burial, composition studies continues to go forward "looking over [its] shoulder at some fear."

Few have acknowledged that while looking backward we have stumbled into our own disciplinary memory, reconstructing it in the (re)claimed institutional space. As it turns out, the tyranny of academic professionalism appears less tyrannical the closer one is to the center of authority. Susan Miller has been a notable exception. "[I]ntellectual and 'practical' moves toward equality for composition," Miller writes, "reproduce the hegemonic superstructure . . . . they are politically unified attempts to become equal in, and to sustain, a hierarchy that their supporters often claim to be overturning" (51). The short history of composition studies has been one of appropriation--appropriation of the same disciplinary categories and attitudes, appropriation of the very tyrannizing image that once seemed oppressive.

The reorientation of some composition specialists from "hapless bottom feeders" to endowed chairs has come about through the acceptance of values, assumptions, and practices that have traditionally enforced the hierarchical oppositions sometimes

deplored in rhetoric and composition. Through a process of professionalization the huge group of non-publishing composition teachers--once grouped by vocation if not profession--are now effectively marginalized or devalued even *within* the context of rhetoric and composition. No longer can we look to the traditional literature/composition binary to explain the hierarchy of productivity in English departments.

I would argue that by explicitly impugning the quality of instruction in writing classes, publishing composition specialists have not only laid claim to superiority and privilege, but elevated their work to the level of necessity. The exercise of traditional disciplinary values in the construction of contemporary composition studies has brought us back to the future.

How did this happen? How did publishing professionals seize writing instruction and institutionalize clientism, turning a couple of homey teaching periodicals--College English and College Composition and Communication--into the sacred well that, in Weaver's terms, hold all of the cultural activities in a subservience of acknowledgment?

In a 1966 Isis article, George H. Daniels constructs a framework to explain the professionalization of the sciences in the nineteenth-century American university. According to Daniels, the professionalization of an academic field begins through a process he terms *preemption*. This procedure takes place in a "period of emergence" in which a task that has

> customarily been performed by one group or by everybody in general comes into the exclusive possession of another particular group. This . . . occurs when the body of knowledge necessary for the task becomes esoteric, that is, when it becomes obviously unavailable to the general[ist]. (152)

In a 1982 College Composition and Communication article, "Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," Maxine Hairston exhibits a maneuver repeated over and over as composition scholars struggled for institutional recognition, the claim to professional status. Hairston declares an impending "paradigm shift" in composition studies finding, not surprisingly, the "most promising indication" in the work of "specialists who are doing controlled and directed research on writers' composing processes" (85).

Hairston's article is instructive not only in the privilege it assigns to published truth claims that she labels "research," but in the conviction with which the professional/client hierarchy is revealed. According to Hairston, the group of "people who do most to promote a static and unexamined approach to teaching writing . . . probably includes most . . . teachers of writing." Writing teachers who can't or don't read the professional literature, Hairston says, are "probably doing more harm than good" (79).

The process of making composition "obviously unavailable," in Daniels' terms, to the non-specialist through a process of

preemption, of bringing composition into the "exclusive possession" of a group of specialists, is completed by Hairston in the tacit and unquestioned sanction of published research. Teachers without knowledge of the professional literature are teachers without knowledge: "they are frequently emphasizing techniques that *the research* has largely discredited" (80--my emphasis). Hairston's claim does not privilege any one theory or method; it recommends that effective teaching demands knowledge--possession--of the professional literature itself.

As Hairston's article demonstrates, the subordination of "local" values--primarily teaching--to professional values reflects the degree of importance placed on the primary material incentive for advancement, scholarly publication; and it is published scholarship that defines the dichotomization of labor in composition studies. Familiarity with and production of scholarly manuscripts designates the essence of academic professionalism. While the PhD functions as certification for tenure-line entry into the university, status, success, and prestige adhere to those with the strongest ties to the professional population of publishing scholars. Once legitimized by composition's "epistemic court," the knowledge products of individual professionals are transformed into marketable currency, and therefore power, for the individual professionals who compose them. The very materiality of a textual product promotes this exchange value. Itself an extension of other texts, every published article is a potential

locus for continued profitability as an artifact to be possessed and assimilated in later ventures.

Defined, on the other hand, by what they are/have not, non-publishing writing teachers are the economically disadvantaged. The vast majority of those who each year teach writing to four million freshman students are neither producers nor consumers; they simply do not engage in the exchange of valid academic currency. Their work is transitory and predominantly oral; the written texts they work with--textbooks, student texts, and their own commentaries on/about student texts--have little professional value. Their own experience systematically discounted through the institutional privilege of textual authority, non-publishing teachers are implicitly defined as clients for theoretical claims validated by the professional publication industry.

In the decade or so since Hairston's "Winds of Change" few such overt, specific instances of teacher bashing have been recorded. The condition that Stephen North described in 1987--"Researchers and Scholars find out what there is to know, and then pass that knowledge along to Practitioners" (331)--has become tacit in composition studies as an institutionalized clientism. Elizabeth Rankin, for example, describes the sort of teacher to whom she would lend credence in this way:

> [W]hen an experienced, enlightened composition instructor--say one who's been teaching six or eight years and keeps up with CCC, College English, and Rhetoric Review--tells me that writing groups "work" in

> her classes, I'm likely at least to pay attention to her claim. (Rankin 266)

Rankin confirms that educational certification, the satisfaction of hiring criteria, and teaching experience are finally sanctioned only through the influence of the publishing industry.

And what, we must finally ask, is not? Once we recognize the inescapability of the observation that composition studies, the academic discipline, is nothing more than the professional discourse itself, we must credit the enterprise with whatever emerges from it. Current debates in the field are products of written scholarship itself; any answers can be visualized only through a lens ground (or grounded) in the present professional order of composition's scholarly publishing.

And while we may bite the hand that feeds--as it might appear I'm doing now--there is no danger of drawing blood--efforts at resistance through publication are inevitably exercises in co-optation. "[W]e all, when given the opportunity . . . wind up perpetuating the system instead of attacking it" (Markley, "Discussion" 81). This does not suggest, of course, that the publishing system is immutable, only that by its very function it appropriates the claims of its authors, tacitly re-authorizing them in a larger, institutional context. And every disseminated text carries within itself the potential for self-justification. Janice Lauer once asserted that if published scholarship "does inspire action and change . . . this action in turn provides a type of validation" ("Composition" 24).

This, I would argue, is the ultimate tyranny of a culture's centralizing image--the ability to legislate conformity to it by making itself appear part of the natural order. The elevation of the publishing professional as the cultural ideal of those who teach writing is an *achieved* state of affairs, a construction, an argument. If we can't imagine the possibility of teaching writing effectively without subjugating ourselves to or becoming a publishing academic professional, we're staring directly into the tyrannizing image. We can safely look away from the deification of "research" and the publishing composition professional as the ideal of its own excellence. We can begin to answer the question raised by this symposium, What comes after Rhetoric and Composition? We need only recognize that most of the people publishing in composition today, most of those who argued passionately in the 60s, 70s, and 80s for the importance of research and scholarship, and every dead writer you've ever loved somehow became critically, persuasively, and inventively literate *outside* the matrix of what we now call composition studies.

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